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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the educational background to the rise of interest in "British Studies." The document examines some tensions between arguments for a nationally-based curriculum area and for teaching as an emancipatory activity, considering such issues in the light of recent approaches to research on the curriculum. Finally, the paper considers the teacher's role as mediator in an attempt to define the most appropriate methodological stance for an inevitably contentious subject area. (EH)

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**CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION**
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# BRITISH CULTURAL STUDIES: SOME EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS

**CHRISTOPHER BRUMFIT**

SO 026 990

**OCTOBER 1994**

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**Introduction**

In this paper I explore the educational background to the rise of interest in "British Studies". I examine some tensions between arguments for a nationally-based curriculum area and for teaching as an emancipatory activity, and then consider such issues in the light of recent approaches to research on the curriculum. Finally, I consider the teacher's role as mediator in an attempt to define the most appropriate methodological stance for an inevitably contentious subject area.

First, though, it may be helpful to express some of the concerns that many teachers feel about the new interest in this field. The concept "British Studies" raises a number of problems for educators, particularly those brought up within the liberal tradition that has dominated intellectual thinking in the second half of the twentieth century. The generation that was educated in the years after the second world war acquired a number of tacit assumptions that proved highly productive in the optimistic period of international regeneration, but which are severely challenged by the pessimism underlying contemporary conservative culture. Among these assumptions was a belief in the power of formal education to overcome the fundamental problems of poverty, ignorance and disease and (in the strongest version) to create a peace-loving and creative community of egalitarian altruists. Such naive hopes required a liberation from the local loyalties that had led us all to two world wars, to bureaucratic tyranny and racist dogma. Education was internationalist, optimistic, mildly anti-wealth and suspicious of national governments unless they were engaged in freedom struggles against the major imperial powers.

This picture may be a stereotype, but it is by no means a caricature. In the 1960s, volunteers from the "developed" world poured into "developing" countries to teach in schools and universities, and do their bit to dismantle their own empires, or (as with the Peace Corps) to undermine others'. In Africa and Asia national ideologies were promoted, as a means of overcoming more local loyalties, usually paying lip-service to some form of socialism, each aiming at greater independence, greater equality, greater international anti-imperialist collaboration, and (though less explicitly stated) greater power over their own destinies. Conservative prime ministers welcomed the winds of

change, and nations like South Africa which resisted were consigned if not to the dustbins of history at least to those of the United Nations. And central to the realisation of these goals was the education system, designed to a western European pattern, senior-staffed by western trained teachers or by imported western expatriates (frequently written as "ex-patriots", as indeed they often were), superimposed on the vast traditional network of ordinary people's cultural relations, with which it scarcely interacted at all.

Nor was this model solely a response to the fragmenting twentieth century empires: it drew on a long-standing European tradition. Nationalism, emancipation and increased educational provision had contributed massively to the collapse of the European empires following the first world war,and to earlier nineteenth century freedom movements (see Hobsbawm, 1962: 164-171). The rhetoric of the succeeding power configurations, whether for the Communist International or for the League of Nations, reinforced beliefs that the wider the collaboration, the safer the world would become.

Teachers were the minor missionaries of this process. What they did to their pupils in Europe, their pupils did to theirs in turn, both at home and abroad. Education and progress rode together, hand in hand.

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It is easy to ridicule this model, for the conflict between these internationalist aspirations and nationalist *realpolitik* was plain to see. But it offered a potent ideal to education: an opportunity, it seemed, to contribute to the improvement of the world both by overcoming petty nationalisms and by advancing equality between nations. Ironically for western exponents of this view, the substantial shift in economic power away from the west, arising from the oil crisis of the early 1970s, coincided (and perhaps contributed to) the popularisation of the conservative and the post-modernist critiques of such optimistic hopes. But these criticisms have been increasingly questioned as the 1980s have moved into the 1990s, and the aspirations of the 1960s may prove to have worn better than their critics anticipated. For, while not entirely disinterested, the cause was certainly not ignoble. Not only were children's lives sometimes saved, the negative effects of

technology sometimes mitigated, tyrannies sometimes defeated (even if others arose), but the side effects of the free-market economies springing from the right-wing critique (perhaps allowed to develop more aggressively by the acceptance of impotence implicit in the cultural relativism that was central to the left's critique), have been the predictable emergence of virulent nationalist movements whose ideologies will inevitably conflict with the pluralistic tendencies of mass communication, air travel and increased educational opportunity. While we cannot avoid sharing the disappointment at the continuing poverty, the continuing violence and instability of the countries for whom a generation of professionals worked (it seemed) so hard, it is difficult any longer to accept that intervention by professionals was the problem rather than the response. The World Bank has been increasingly attacked for its insensitive implementation of monetarist policies, and the pressures of major crises in Africa, Europe and the Middle East force social intervention back into the centre of the west's agenda.

In such an atmosphere, the competing ideologies, the post-1945 left-liberal consensus explicitly opposed by Thatcherism and the monetarist identification of democracy with the free market espoused by the right, are engaged in a more equal struggle than they were a decade ago. Education once again has international relevance. The universal subject, the emphasis on what is shared by human beings rather than the cultural oppositions that create difference, is again important. As universality has been abandoned for particularity, trânsnational loyalties have become parochial or ethnic, and the negative effects are visible in each day's newspapers.

Thus any discussion of the teaching (or learning) of British Culture poses acute ideological problems. If we are being asked to accept the ethnic or cultural reductionism of the 1980s embedded in the curriculum in the form of nationalist studies, we need to examine our principles with great care, for it would be easy to slip into triumphalism in an effort to simplify and clarify complex historical processes for learners. On the other hand, if we are in fact responding to a demand by offering a set of values that can be defended in terms of universal needs, we have a responsibility to make as valuable a contribution as we are capable of. Either way, since we are considering a curriculum area, we are obliged to relate its justification to broad educational concerns. In the rest

of the paper, I shall consider the implications of educational research for a responsible role for British Studies, and particularly for teaching methodology.

**Britishness in a Liberal Perspective**

The educational assumptions attributed to the 1960s reflect a view of British culture, a view based on a confident political and social tradition. In this tradition Britain's most distinctive contribution is a willingness to wash its dirty linen in public (because of a self-confident pride in the effort to improve through public and accountable criticism), and a civic life that values incorruptibility, public service and lack of concern for personal gain. At its best it risks priggishness, at its worst hypocrisy; but it incorporates ideals that were popularly and justifiably celebrated by atheoretical libertarian writers from Milton and Fielding to Orwell. If the worth of such values for British Studies now appears less self-evident than it might have done in the past (and such assertions are notably absent in discussion of the area), it is because British Studies are being promoted when the concept of "Britishness" is much disputed. For fourteen years the government, elected by a minority of voters, has explicitly repudiated compromise and national consensus and produced a unilateral assertion of what national values are (see, for example successive disputes over History and English Language in the National Curriculum for schools). Consequently, discussions of British Studies that recognise the historical changes underlying contemporary arguments cannot avoid consideration of the relationship between national identity and oppositional politics.

In additional to these concerns, internal to Britain, there are concerns about the international context. Promotion of British Studies has developed at a time when assertions of national values against supranational groupings have become politically significant in several parts of the world. "National" here becomes defined as ethnic, set against governmental, as in the break up of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR. But "British" is supranational in the same sense as those countries were. What makes Britishness defensible if the others are not?

Because of the complexity of such problems, it is easiest to take the view that there is a market for British Studies, and there is a legal entity, Britain, and to offer no more than description and analysis. Hence we have the eclectic sets of materials recommended by interested agencies (the 1991 British Council list of library materials includes books on art, economics, education, geography, language, law, literature, politics, science, religion, sport and theatre along with customs, food, monarchy, television and other less weighty topics). This is Britain as a set of given facts, or as an organism, but not Britain as something to believe in. Yet a set of given facts does not constitute a serious curriculum area. Without a carefully thought-through teaching methodology, such an approach risks being no more than intellectual tourism, or high-grade stereotyping.

Any serious curriculum analysis forces us to ask "What is this field of study for?", and that takes us back to the ironies of our earlier discussion. If we teach values as "givens", how do we distinguish ourselves from the most reactionary "blood, language and soil" nationalism? If we teach values as "process", we have to locate ourselves in a critical spirit within or outside the national and nationalist values referred to above.

So there is a fundamental irony that we cannot escape. If we approach teaching about Britain in a cautious, liberal, consensus-seeking manner, looking for what is best for civilisation, and defending approaches because they are as right as we can make them, not because they are British, we are in direct conflict with both internal and external ideologies. We can no longer defend this view as a product of a particular British tradition (popularly, the myth that "this was what we fought the second world war about"; academically, a pragmatic, sceptical and reformist philosophical and social tradition incorporating Locke, Mill, Popper as well as Wilberforce, Gaskell, Orwell, Beveridge et al). Yet we can only teach what we are, and when we devise procedures, design curricula, and define new courses, we cannot avoid questioning and problematising "Britishness" if we belong to an academic British tradition. Perhaps the only way to proceed is to be explicit about this paradox.

**Key curriculum concepts**

"British Studies" is a curriculum innovation which has been developed outside the mainstream of British education by practitioners who have not usually been closely involved in the debates in Britain of the past twenty years on the nature of the curriculum. It is therefore worth briefly describing some of these issues, for they have direct relevance to questions about British Studies which are central to our discussion.

Much formal education has not in the past seen the content of education as problematic. Subject material might be adjusted and up-dated, but the range of subject areas, the generally accepted knowledge associated with each subject, and the hierarchy of prestigious areas essential for social advance is not typically questioned except in periods of crisis. Nonetheless, curriculum discussion may be directed to a range of different goals. Skilbeck (1976) discusses **classical humanist**, **reconstructionist** and **progressivist** ideologies. Each of these places emphasis on a different aspect of the educational process. **Classical humanism** emphasises the knowledge and content inherited from the past, **reconstructionism** the needs of society for social improvement, and **progressivism** the development of individual potential in all its diversity. Golby (1989) develops Skilbeck's categories to include several different curriculum traditions. He calls the tradition that is concerned with implementation of an allegedly agreed and uncontentious body of knowledge **technocratic**, links it to **reconstructionism**,and argues that the British National Curriculum (introduced for England and Wales only by the Education Act of 1988) combines **humanist** and **technocratic** assumptions. He calls for a new **cultural analysis** curriculum which draws on recent understanding of educational sociology. This approach, which Golby only sketches out very briefly, reflects a substantial shift in academic thinking about education, arising from experiences of the 1960s and 1970s.

In Britain, partly as a result of the major structural readjustment caused by the introduction of comprehensive, rather than selective, secondary schooling in the 1960s, many curriculum assumptions previously taken for granted were isolated, examined, and probed during the 1970s and 1980s. A key text in this process was Michael F D Young's edited collection *Knowledge and Control*, published in 1971. In this book a number of contributors questioned, with varying degrees of polemic, the beliefs about the stability and neutrality of the knowledge that schools made available to learners. For many in

British education, this offered the first serious engagement with postmodernistideas that had been emerging throughout Europe in the decades following the second world war. But it also pushed discussion of the curriculum away from a prescriptive and confident assertion of what the adult world ought to be doing to those in receipt of compulsory schooling, towards a more serious sociological concern with current practices as they were realised through action in classrooms, and the processes by which knowledge was filtered through the education system to learners. This shift marked a striking departure from the concerns about the different forms of knowledge of philosophers of education like Hirst (1974), who were interested in structures that were independent of social context; it was also distinct from the curricular traditions of psychological schools such as behaviourism, as in Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of knowledge, skill and affective elements in the curriculum. As Hammersley and Hargreaves (1983) point out, the new sociology of education encouraged suspicion of too clean and rationalist an approach to the curriculum, and a greater recognition of "the unavoidable daily 'messiness' of teaching" (p.4).

Following this shift in academic educational interest, a number of commentators have examined the processes of social construction: the history and sociology of school and university subjects (generally, see Becher, 1989; for English, Doyle, 1989; Protherough, 1989; Evans, 1993; for modern languages, Evans, 1988). Similarly, curriculum practice has been re-examined (Hammersley & Hargreaves, 1983). From the technocratic view of the curriculum as essentially an administrative issue, perspectives shifted to a concern with its unobserved working processes - a shift reflected in metaphors like "the hidden curriculum" and references to the curriculum as "the secret garden" (Lawton, 1979).

The technological tradition of curriculum discussion concentrated on key structural issues, of scope and coverage, of ordering, of aims and objectives. The sociological approach was concerned far more with processes and behaviour rather than plans and specifications. But the two approaches are inevitably complementary. Without a structure and demarcation, there is no field within which to behave, and educational institutions, being institutions, inevitably produce statements for planning and administrative purposes. Such statements cannot avoid questions of structure and coverage.

**Objectives for particular student groups**

The curriculum issues referred to in the previous section raise a number of questions for "British Studies", which can be related to the traditions discussed there. On the one hand, we need to consider the prime objectives of the subject: are we exposing students to a liberal-humanist perspective, Britain as part of a particular tradition in western civilisation, Britain at its most humane? are we using Britain as an instrument in social reconstruction, the basis of free markets, the bastion of democracy? are we providing an example of a particular form of constantly deconstructing, constantly criticising and analysing, constantly problematising, approach to cultural phenomena, in which it is the academic approach that is distinctively British, rather than the content, which is incidentally British, but really need not be? On the other hand, we need to consider the internal structure and organisation of material to be included: how much are we concerned with "knowledge about Britain"? how explicitly are we concerned with affective factors, encouraging students to admire and respect Britain? are there skills that we would expect students of British Studies to acquire? what should be the scope and coverage of the course? in what sense can there be progression? what are the appropriate modes of assessment?

Answers to these questions are crucially dependent on the needs of particular groups of students. Yet the educational issue cannot be reduced to any simple identification of topics with student interests or anticipated needs. In a recent issue of the British Council's newsletter *British Studies*, Montgomery (1993) contrasts the concern with British Institutions characteristic of German "landeskunde" and French "civilisation" courses with the cultural analysis approach inspired by the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. This is a similar contrast to that advanced by Golby between technocratic/humanist and cultural analysis curricula. Yet, in the context of British Studies, the latter approach is developing a methodology which still requires decisions to be made about which aspects of British life to concentrate on, and consequently a selection of "institutions" for investigation. If the choice of institutions results in a sociology of British society becoming the subject of investigation, potential students will presumably be those who need to understand the nature of contemporary life

in Britain. If the choice is more historically or institutionally based, there is still a choice to be made between "typical" institutions, and those events, such as literary or scientific achievements, that have held their place in contemporary interest because of the value that subsequent generations have placed upon them. Thus we have a matrix:

| | "Typical" | "Valued" |
|---|---|---|
| **Past** | eg Henry Mayhew<br>Mass Observation | eg Isaac Newton<br>Virginia Woolf |
| **Present** | eg Private schools<br>Leisure Pursuits | eg Tom Stoppard<br>Thatcherism? |

But as the entries for the present illustrate at once, decisions about what to include immediately raise questions of whose values are being promoted by the selection of topics for study. While there may be a general educated consensus on major events, intellectual movements, and significant individuals in the past (though of course the debate on "the canon" is specifically about the contentiousness of such claims for consensus), no such agreement is likely about contemporary social phenomena.

This disagreement is only partly a matter of distance. Montgomery comments that outside Britain institutional study is valued, while inside it cultural analysis is preferred. Certainly, for many learners, Britain is in some sense a "given" culture which needs describing, while inside Britain, individuals are engaged in the sometimes painful process of creating Britain through struggle. But while curricular decisions made by insiders will reflect participant ideologies in a different way from those made by outsiders, both will be claiming typicality, for both will be selecting significant items from a much wider range of possible choices. Nonetheless, this difference in perspective raises serious questions for foreign learners who are taught by British teachers. Participants in the

culture will inevitably present an insider, and partisan view which foreign teachers of British studies may hope to avoid.

Montgomery, however, sees the two approaches more neutrally as options for any teachers, and attempts to find a principled way of relating their two sets of concerns. He sees such a way in the study of language as a social institution. Variation according to user is, he suggests, variation of identity, identified particularly by class, gender and region. Variation according to use is more closely tied in to institutions. The study of dialectal variation will contribute to a concern for cultural analysis, while institutional analysis will be supported by a concern for genres and registers. But this is to associate both approaches with the data as "given" while proponents of the cultural studies approach often have a more fundamental agenda, associated with the critical discourse movement (Fairclough, 1990). For such advocates of cultural studies, part of the teacher's role is to expose the power relations underlying varying social discourses, and to show the workings of competition and political manoeuvre that underlie apparently innocent linguistic and social relationships. Again, the tension between ideological stance and a body of content shows itself.

**British Studies as a curriculum area**

It will be clear from previous discussion that any curriculum area will simultaneously show some characteristics of all earlier traditions. Institutional constraints in education are strong, and however radical teachers wish to be, they are forced by their professional environment to operate within unavoidable constraints. Among these are the following:

1. a selection has to be made from the mass of possible subject matter;
2. the process of teaching and learning requires that the selection is given some organising principle(s) to enable learners to come to grips with it at all;
3. criteria for the selection and organisation will include explicit (or, frequently, implicit) goals for the learners to achieve; these goals must reflect a realistic assessment of what learners bring to the study at the beginning: if they do not the curriculum will be so unrealistic that it will be doomed to failure;

4. failure to make the processes in 1-3 above explicit to teachers will result in wasted effort and inefficient organisation.

It is striking how little discussion of learning issues actually appears in accounts of British Studies. Yet our understanding of processes of learning is now both sophisticated and sensitive to variation caused by variables such as age, cultural expectations and previous experience of learning. A number of key points about processes of learning can be made from the experience of formal education in the past. First, learners construct their own meanings by a process of engagement with appropriate data. They must, therefore, be offered opportunities to interact with data. Second, their construction of effective meaning depends on being able to integrate their new understanding with the sets of categories they are already using to deal with previous experience. Thus learning depends in interaction between the new and the old. Because of this, the procedures used in teaching, and the selection of issues for study, will need to recognise not only motivating and appropriate material, but also means of integrating comprehension of Britain with the knowledge and understanding that students already have.

This brings us to a key paradox. Most discussion of British Studies has concentrated on ways and means of "presenting" one or other of the many possible critical perspectives on Britain. Yet unless we are able to clarify exactly what kind of study activity a particular course is practising, and how this relates to the previous understanding of the learners, the presentation risks being educationally ineffective. It seems to be widely agreed, as Dunn remarks, "that the 'Studies' part of the title has come, over the last twenty years, to be understood as a code for interdisciplinarity" (Dunn, 1994: 11), but, as he points out, there may have been a retreat into traditional discipline structures. However, it is not so much the discipline structure that is likely to pose educational problems; most subjects, and particularly social studies, become interdisciplinary when they are taught to relatively inexperienced learners. Rather, it is the difficulty of relating the classroom processes called upon by teachers to the knowledge and experience of the learners. Understanding such knowledge and experience will cause us to examine the obvious issues of how to connect knowledge of British constitutional structures, scientific and literary history or sporting practices with learners' knowledge of their own countries. It also enables us to

explore the relationship between critical approaches expected by British-based teachers and those expected of learners at home, and the epistemologies that learners take for granted (knowledge as authoritative fact versus knowledge as best available hypothesis versus knowledge as vested interest of the powerful, to stereotype some contemporary positions). It also forces us to take into account the relationship between the skills and practices for the consideration of cultures that learners have already acquired and those needed for British Studies. All three of these general areas are of course closely bound up with each other in ways that are culturally grounded, and difficult to analyse, so it is scarcely surprising if the solution is often a tendency to rely on the content and to slide past other issues with eyes averted.

The most sophisticated attempt to deal with these other aspects is described in the work of Michael Byram (his published works from Byram, 1990, to Byram, Morgan et al, 1994, and references in those, will give a full picture of his work). He started with a concern for the role of culture in foreign language learning, but his studies have far wider implications, because of his interest in developing students' abilities to analyse and comment on culture, both in their own and in the foreign environment. Nonetheless, turning learners into ethnographers in their own right is not an easy option on courses in which overseas travel unavailable, so modified versions of cultural sensitisation will be necessary on many courses. What makes Byram's approach significant, though, is the central role of learners' understanding of their own cultures. The main way through most of the paradoxes that have been identified in this paper seems to be a recognition that British Studies must in the end be a comparative activity.

Once the specification of what learners can be expected to understand already about their own culture has been completed, the traditional concerns of technological curriculum design become primarily administrative issues, relating to resouces, time and space. But that first specification has wide implications. It will suggest, for example, the extent to which the British Studies curriculum should concentrate on a historical approach, perhaps drawing upon liberal-humanist assumptions of quality and value, or on a contemporary analysis, either "critical" or sociological-descriptive. It will suggest, of course, the extent to which artistic, scientific, economic or popular culture may be prominent, and it will

indicate realistic approaches to assessment (where relevant), student participation and teaching mode.

Yet to describe the curriculum task in this way is not to deny the importance of the individual teachers. The educational principles discussed in this paper provide a background for what is always, in the last resort, a personal relationship between teacher and taught. Such a relationship depends upon the teacher feeling that the approach adopted is not just appropriate to the learners, but also honest to the teacher's beliefs. Consequently, whatever understanding derives from the kinds of analysis referred to here must be modified by careful interaction with the teacher's own expectations. At the same time, as I have tried to argue here, the teaching role when dealing with British Studies is subject to ideological and attitudinal tensions which other subjects such as language and literature possess in a much more muted form. For British native-culture teachers, some of these problems may disappear if they can always teach and plan jointly with a local person. But many of them are inherent in the subject, and constitute both its risks and its challenges.

**Note**: A revised version of this paper will appear in a New Accents Series volume: Studying British Cultures, ed.Susan Bassnett, Routledge, 1995

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